

Minnesota Senate District 59 DFL
2011 Senate Special Election Candidate Questionnaire
Distributed Tuesday November 22 • Due 5:00PM Tuesday November 29

The following is an informational Questionnaire for all candidates actively campaigning for the MN Senate District 59 DFL Special Primary Election to complete. Candidates: please respond to each question as completely as possible. Please cut and paste each question separately above each response so that each question and response corresponds to one another. Please type your name and contact information at the top of page one of the completed Questionnaire.

Please submit your completed Questionnaire electronically to Harrison Nelson, SD 59 DFL Chair at: chair@sd-59.org by the deadline of 5:00PM Tuesday November 29

The SD 59 DFL will post the full text (verbatim) of each Candidate Questionnaire online for public review prior to the November 30, 2011 Candidate Forum. The SD 59 DFL will also post the Questionnaire questions in advance of the Candidate Forum in order to give the public a sense of what questions candidates will already be addressing to help them narrow the questions they may wish to ask at the Forum. Please be as thorough with your responses as you wish also remembering that those who read your responses are looking for concise, clear information. Thank you for your cooperation in a full effort to educate, inform and empower Senate District 59 voters.

Legislative Priorities

1) Which three committee assignments would you request? Why would you request these three?

- **Health and Human Services because I worked at the state's Department of Human Services for many years and I want to apply my first-hand knowledge of the way programs such as health-care, food supports and child care assistance programs work to my legislative work.**
- **Education because we must close the achievement gap in our schools. As a Somali-American I look forward to provide my input into education matters from the perspective of under-represented communities.**
- **Jobs and Economic Growth - because members of our community need jobs. Creating good jobs will be the fastest way to help our economy recover and end our perpetual cycle of budget deficits.**

Taxes and Budget

1) If you had revenues of \$100 (to symbolize the state's budget revenues) how would you allocate those revenues according to your priorities and your understanding of the budget and public priorities (so those priorities add up to \$100)?

My understanding is that currently our budget breaks down like this:

From the general fund:

37% K-12 Education
29% Health and Human Services
9% Higher Ed
10% Property Tax Aids and Credits
6% Public Safety
4% Debt Service
4% Other (Transportation, Economic Development, Ag, Veterans)
1% Environment, Energy and Natural Resources

I believe we have a revenue problem in state government, not a spending problem. I believe we should increase funding for nearly all of these important priorities. The idea of shifting the parts of pie from one budget category to another is a zero sum game that only funds one thing at the expense of another.

Through my work as a state employee at the Department of Human Services, I have first-hand knowledge of how a large percentage of state funds are spent. It was my job to determine eligibility for programs such as food supports (food stamps) and child care assistance. These things fall under the nearly 30% of our budget that goes to health and human services.

But there are things we can do to reduce costs. I believe the tobacco bond gimmick used to solve the budget standoff this year will only increase the amount of debt service we will need to pay. That will come at the expense of education, health and human services and higher education. We must not use these types of penny wise and pound foolish short-cuts.

So if I had my way I would reduce the debt service portion of the budget to \$3 (based on the \$100 idea). I do, though, believe in bonding for capital improvement projects.

We can also reduce costs in health and human services. I believe we need a single-payer universal health care system which will ultimately reduce costs. Let's say that would reduce this cost area to \$25.

We can also collect more revenue. Millions of dollars in uncollected tax dollars goes uncollected every year. We must make sure we collect what is owed to us. This would expand the pie.

By collecting additional revenue, reducing health care costs through a single-payer approach and reducing our reliance on credit, we can use these funds to expand our investment in both K-12 and higher education to \$40 and \$12 respectively.

2) What is your position on tax policy? What are the relationships between income tax, sales tax, property tax, user fees and other surcharges? If you had to raise revenues how would you do that?

I believe in a progressive tax system that asks those with the most to pay the most. I believe the rich must pay their fair share. That is not currently the case. We must increase progressive income tax revenues and reduce our reliance on user fees and other forms of regressive revenue collectors.

Education

1) What are your priorities for early education, special education, K-12 education and higher education? How would you fund them?

My number one education priority is to close the achievement gap for minority students. The white high school graduation rate in Minneapolis is significantly higher than that of minority students. We can work towards solving this problem by providing adequate resources and by bringing together parents, teachers and community leaders. We must see that all students succeed.

I am very proud of my endorsement from the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers. I look forward to partnering with teachers on this and other education policy issues. I think we can provide more funding to our schools by asking the rich to pay their fair share.

I support increasing both K-12 and higher education funding through taxing the rich and collecting currently uncollected revenue. I also support opting out of No Child Left Behind.

2) What are your views on investing in early childhood education? How would you pay for those? How would you prioritize this with other educational spending?

I support early childhood education. Like my other answers, I would pay for this through additional tax revenues. All parts of our educational system (early childhood, K-12 and higher ed) are all vitally important our advancement as a community.

3) The costs of higher education continue to escalate while the resources available to most MN students and families decrease. How do you plan to address the rising cost of higher education with continuing decreases in financial resources especially in a very stressed economy?

I know personally how student loan debt impacts an individual and a family. We must decrease tuition costs by asking the rich to pay their fair share. The wealthiest among us need employees in their corporations. They must invest through their tax dollars in their future employees.

Social Justice and Equity

1) What is your position on the extension of basic family protections such as health insurance, pension benefits, sick and bereavement pay to unmarried partners and non-biological children of governmental/public employees as currently afforded married heterosexuals?

I support universal access to these benefits. I also support full marriage rights for everyone. I am proud of my endorsement from the Stonewall DFL GLBT Caucus. I look forward to being a liaison to the East African Community on these issues.

As a public employee I worked with many gay and lesbian colleagues. I think it is wrong that the rights and benefits in our union contract were not equally available to all of us. That is wrong and it must be changed.

2) What is your position on the use of Photo ID as a requirement for voting? What changes (if any) would you propose to improve voter participation, and election fairness, efficiency and accuracy?

I strongly oppose voter ID. It is intentionally aimed at making it more difficult for people like me from voting. I will be a vocal opponent of this measure.

I would like to expand voting-by-mail options.

My personal experience has shown me that a path to citizenship is a path to civic participation. Thus one way to increase voter involvement is by allowing more of our neighbors (particularly those from Latin America) to become citizens.

Health Care

1) Given that many Minnesotans are without any health care coverage, are under insured, cannot receive coverage for specific health conditions, or cannot access the proper medications, how would you increase the number of Minnesotans covered and the quality of their coverage? What else would you do to improve the current health insurance climate? How would you pay for that?

I strongly support single-payer universal health care. I believe that in the long run it will reduce costs while providing better quality care to all.

2) What would you do to improve the health and living conditions of the elderly, young children and others at risk? How would you pay for that?

We must invest in education about health issues in all communities. This is a small investment that will save money in the long-run.

For example, right now there is a misunderstanding about vaccinations in some immigrant communities. We must invest in community-specific health awareness so can save dollars and lives.

3) What would you do to address the critical problem of access to health insurance for small and micro-businesses?

I believe we need to do better outreach about the availability of the programs that do exist. As a state Senator, and an immigrant myself, I will be a particularly effective in reaching to immigrant small businesses and micro businesses throughout District 59 and beyond to make them aware of the programs that do exist at this time.

Economy/Jobs/Small Business

1) What are the largest hurdles to the greater success of small and microbusiness? How would you lower those hurdles and minimize the barriers to their economic improvement?

District 59 has a thriving small business climate. We need to nurture entrepreneurs and assist small business creation. We can do this by shifting the millions of dollars we spend on corporate welfare to small business and also by closing corporate tax loopholes.

I believe that one barrier to economic development is a cultural one. There are programs available now that many entrepreneurs of all backgrounds in our community may not be aware of. I look forward to being a liaison to all communities in our District to expand visibility and access to existing programs and identify innovations to better support business development and expansion.

2) In the context of *job creation*, where are nearly all U.S. jobs (since 2002) being created?

According to an article in Business Week, since 2002 the vast majority of jobs created have been from the government and military. Much of this has been due to the wars overseas. Ironically these have happened under the previous Republican Presidential administration. We must show that, in reality, the GOP is not really the party of small government at all.

3) What is Minnesota's role in the global economy? What would you propose to support your position and serve the best interests of the Minnesota economy and Minnesotans?

Minnesota plays a vital role in the global economy. Companies such as Medtronic and 3M succeed in our globally-connected economic environment. At the same time, though, globalization through trade agreements like NAFTA has had a negative impact on some sectors of our economy.

The diversity so evident in the communities of Northeast and Southeast Minneapolis is our greatest asset on the global stage. As an immigrant myself I will work to increase educational opportunities for minority students so that today's world-focused businesses have trained employees who literally speak the language of globalization.

Public Safety and Crime Prevention

1) What is your position on the availability of guns and particularly handguns? What is your position on the use of background checks prior to the purchase of firearms? Do you support periodic checks of current license holders?

I oppose expanding the availability of guns. I support background checks both initially and on an ongoing basis.

2) What specific legislation would you propose to reduce crime? What types of legislation would you propose to aid in the prevention of crime?

We must address youth violence. A large percentage of the most violent crime happening in our community is being perpetrated by children. For the most part I think the laws already on the books are sufficient but must be applied with greater cultural awareness.

The solution to crime problems is not more crime laws, it's better schools and more jobs.

3) What is your position regarding Second Chance programs and opportunities for ex-offenders to reenter the community while balancing those initiatives with public safety and media influences?

I support Second Chance. We are a community and Minnesota is a state which believe in robust civic participation as a means to engage all members of our community and assist people in reaching their full potential. Excluding ex-felons from the opportunity to vote is contrary to this commitment.

Environmental Safety/Energy Policy

1) How would you balance the interests of citizens and the environmental community with the interests of industry, finance and the business community?

Northeast Minneapolis has been balancing the interests of businesses and industry with the environment and residential neighborhoods for over 100 years. We must create jobs but we cannot pollute our neighborhoods in the process. I also support incentives to create green jobs and will work with unions, workforce development experts and the private sector to attract investment to all areas of our district.

2) What is your position on energy, the use of alternative and renewable energy sources, and Minnesota's role in this arena? What key resources does Minnesota have to make good progress?

I support alternative energy and renewable energy. Our best resources in Minnesota are wind and solar. Labor unions are a key ally in this effort. The training programs created by unions in our region to manufacture solar panels are one example of how we can create good jobs and expand our state's role in the green economy. We also have key resources in our higher education institutions which attract significant research grants in this area. Lastly, we have support from our business leaders who recognize that investments in renewable energy is a smart strategy for economic growth.

3) What policies or programs would you support in the areas of state building code compliance with clean energy technology, improved energy efficiency and increased noise protection?

I generally support building codes that include clean energy standards. I will look to my friends in the building trade unions for more guidance on this issue.

Transportation

1) What are your Minnesota transportation priorities as they relate to business, freight, travelers, and public transit including commuters, seniors, people with disabilities, young people, and visitors?

We must expand transit and transportation options for everyone in our community. We must make it easier for people in our neighborhoods and throughout the city to get out to suburban areas where, increasingly, new jobs are available. (Our district is a model for reverse-commuting with the many workers who board Hiawatha LRT in Cedar-Riverside daily to get to jobs at the airport and elsewhere on the southern end of the line.)

I am a strong proponent of a “fix-it-first” strategy which invests in repairing our existing network of streets, roads and highways and would guide greater investment to our neighborhoods. These “fix-it-first” projects are lower-cost and higher-benefit than costly new projects in outlying areas which promote sprawl and discourage compact development.

Our region’s continued economic competitiveness is inextricably linked to our ability to expand our regional transit system. For every dollar of state bonding invested in building our system of LRT, BRT and Commuter Rail, we leverage nine dollars of federal and regional funding. It’s a smart investment and one I will be a passionate advocate for if elected.

2) What is your position on light rail transit? How would you play for light rail transit expansion if you feel it’s needed?

I strongly support expansion of our light rail transit system, complemented by a robust local bus system and possible future streetcars. The Central Corridor LRT line will have several stops in our District and will connect people to jobs, schools, local businesses and cultural institutions between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul. I am committed to working closely with neighbors, city officials and county officials to ensure neighborhood livability concerns such as traffic circulation and parking are thoughtfully addressed during construction and as service begins.

We must build on the momentum and accomplishments already achieved through the 1/4-cent transit sales tax by increasing dedicated funding. I will also be a strong supporter of ensuring that state general fund appropriations to the Metropolitan Council and Metro Transit continue and increase. We must be particularly attentive during the coming 2012 session that these funds do not fall victim to renewed attempts by Tea Party Republicans to eliminate or slash general fund support. We also need a robust bonding bill of at least \$1 billion reflects strong investment in transit.

Your Candidacy

Explain why you are seeking the office of Minnesota State Senator. What will you bring to your constituents? What experiences, expertise and skill sets do you have that make you best suited to hold this position? What specific expertise will you bring to the State Senate that is unique or rare to the body?

Twelve years ago I immigrated to Minneapolis, where I earned a degree in computer science while I worked in union jobs at Hennepin County and then at the state of Minnesota in the Department of Human Services. Today, I live in the Audubon Park neighborhood of Northeast Minneapolis with my wife and our three beautiful children. We are proud Minneapolis Public Schools parents.

I came to Minneapolis so my kids, like me, could achieve the American Dream. We owe it to our children to make sure they have the opportunity to succeed.

I am running for State Senate because I believe we must close the opportunity gap, create jobs and improve our education system so it works for everyone.

I am uniquely prepared to tackle these issues.

- **I am a long-time public employee and a card carrying union member**
- **I was an advisor to both Governors Ventura and Pawlenty through my service on the Council on Black Minnesotans and I also served on the Board of Governors of the Children's Theatre Company.**
- **I oversaw Minnesota's implementation of early the Medicaid expansion through the federal Affordable Care Act as an information technology (IT) systems administrator for the Minnesota Department of Human Services.**
- **I also managed eligibility systems for programs such as food supports, health care, housing and child care assistance.**

Thank you for reading this incredibly thorough questionnaire. I ask you for your vote on December 6 and I look forward to working with you.